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ABSTRACT

Grammar and style contribute to a matrix that expresses the writer's thinking and the values of the academic community. Writers uphold the matrix while presenting their own ideas through a system of "deixis" (to refer to or point to things or ideas not actually present or stated). Nonlinguistic deixis coordinates expression and context in ways that cannot be productively analyzed as grammatical instances. Two kinds of nonlinguistic deixis exist in "structural Poetics": (1) conventional deixis because it amounts to doing things pretty much as they usually are done, which allows the reader to make inferences about what is going on without giving much conscious attention to that fact; and (2) inventional deixis which either satisfies our expectations or disappoints us. Inventional deixis limits the possibilities, making fewer and fewer reader inferences possible, finally making the claim, when it actually comes, appear reasonable, to some readers inevitable. Deixis in published academic writing suggests that we ought to reconsider the evidence, ought to pay more attention than we have to the overwhelming importance of evidence in the academic community. The model or paradigm that takes into account the fully enculturated prose of published academics, subordinates claims to evidence. (HOD)

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Writing in the Academic Community

Any description of writing which tries to talk about more than vocabulary and syntax might be called a rhetoric. If a rhetoric is to be useful to writing teachers and their students, it should be a rhetoric of prose exposition, as opposed, say, to prose fiction. And, further, I think we should stipulate that this rhetoric not only describe expository writing, but that it describe that form of exposition which we and our students read and write--academic writing.

I know it is fashionable to disparage the writing of academics. Likewise, I understand that it is unfashionable, maybe even unwise, to admit that one writes academic prose. But one does. If one is a "publishing" scholar, then one is published by academic presses and journals. I don't think there is any way to get around that, nor do I really think there is any need to do so. I've been studying academic prose for some time now, and I think it's fair to say that some people write excellent academic prose while others do not, and to say that most academic prose is neither very good nor very bad. I imagine that students of prose fiction reach similar conclusions about the novels they read. The important difference between literary critics and me, however, is that they can make formal judgments about good and bad fiction, or if they wish, refrain from doing so, on theoretical grounds because they have a theory (in fact a good many theories) against which to frame their observations on literature. I don't think I do. I think all I really have is conventional wisdom. Obviously, I don't think that's enough or I wouldn't be standing here right now. In fact, I so question the import of received wisdom on academic writing, that I've become suspicious of the license with which we are all of us encouraged to

recite the various malaprops and barbarisms of our colleagues--their use of jargon, their excessive use of passive voice, their retreats into abstractions. Is it necessary to assume, out of hand, that academic prose is a hustle, a con, what the other people write?

I don't think it is. I don't think it is the writing of strangers. I think I write academic prose. And, I see myself as a member of the academic community, which like all communities shares a culture and uses language to accomplish certain goals set up by that culture. The problem is that the academic community is no more explicit about its values than any other group and is inclined, like other groups, to treat its values as self-evident truths. Not only are the values not apparent, they are so deeply embedded that they are difficult to apprehend, even by people who make it their business to do so: "I never really learned to write a paper until I was a graduate student" "I really only learned to write when I did my dissertation" "It wasn't until I wrote my first book that I really learned how to write." All familiar claims and all I suspect true. They represent yet another folk perspective on academic writing, another view of what it means to write academic prose. However, I think we can rephrase this kind of conventional wisdom to make it more useful because these kinds of claims mean that there is something to be learned about writing, something other than lexicon and syntax, which has something to do with being progressively more and more enculturated. "I learned to write like a graduate student when I was a graduate student" "I learned to write a dissertation when I was a Ph.D. candidate" and "I learned to write a publishable book when I was an untenured, assistant professor.

I only have time to work with the last claim: "I learned to write a publishable book when I was an untenured, assistant professor." We all of us feel uneasy until we are published, not only because publishing is required but because published means that what we have to say is appropriate, is somehow con-

nected to what other academics care about. Seen is this way, then, publication is formal approbation by the academic community, public notice that we are members in good standing of the academic community.

I'd like to illustrate my point with a published academic writer whose first book established him as an academic to be reckoned with--Jonathan Culler. I have in mind, of course, Structuralist Poetics, which won the James Russell Lowell Award for an outstanding publication by an MLA member in 1975 and which, since its publication, other literary critics must take into account if they want to talk about the relationship between language and literature. I shall not here be discussing either the style or the grammar of Structuralist Poetics, for I do think that the knowledge required to prepare such a book is either stylistic or grammatical, at least not primarily so. I believe the knowledge to be decidedly cultural--in particular, knowledge of the academic values at issue in theory of literary criticism--a distinct subgroup, I guess we might say, of the larger academic culture, a gang. Grammar and style are a register, a means to an end. Grammar and style contribute to a matrix which expresses the writer's thinking and the values of the academic community. The matrix both sustains and restrains thinkers who think like academics, who think scholarly thoughts that can be judged sound or unsound, as those terms are used in reviews and committees on tenure, for every article and book published in the academic community.

I believe writers uphold the matrix while presenting their own ideas through a system of deixis. Deixis is a term I've appropriated from the grammarians, who themselves appropriated it from classical rhetoricians. So, I consider it rightfully mine. Rudely put, deixis means to refer to or point to things or ideas not actually present or stated. Grammarians use deixis to explain, for instance, the ability in English to mark the past tense with -ed or to replace a noun with a demonstrative pronoun (Microphone with this).

Naturally, I do not plan to base even so preliminary an analysis of academic prose on past tense markers and demonstratives. Instead, I'm interested in what psycholinguist Ragnar Rommetveit in Words, Meanings, and Messages (New York: Academic Press, 1969) and more recently in the essay, "Language Games, Syntactic Structures and Hermeneutics," in Studies of Language, Thought and Verbal Communications, ed. R. Rommetveit and R. M. Blakar (London: Academic Press, 1979) calls nonlinguistic deixis: a deixis that coordinates expression and context in ways that cannot be productively analyzed as grammatical instances.

Let me give you an example of what Rommetveit means. Imagine a couple who has been eating leftovers for three days running. The husband sets his concoction down on the table and lets his wife know that dinner is served. She sits down, looks at the main dish, looks up, and says, "This again." We could analyze her statement linguistically and indeed linguistically it is interesting, as an ellipsis and in its deictic use of the demonstrative "this." But, the point I want to make is that what interests me is that our understanding of their situations makes the syntax less important than our cultural understanding. She could have said this or again or only sighed or rolled her eyes, or played with her food. If you understand leftovers, you are likely not only to interpret the sentence but the situation. Given the way I set up the example, only a recalcitrant person would even want to put another interpretation on her exclamation. After all, it's my story and I get to make it mean what I want it to mean.

In Structuralist Poetics, I see two kinds of nonlinguistic deixis. I call the first kind of deixis conventional deixis because it amounts to doing things pretty much as they usually are done, which allows the reader to make inferences about what is going on without giving much conscious attention to that fact--making inferences, I mean. Although conventional deictics extend beyond the title page of this and any book, the title page is rich in examples of what I mean.

Title page of

Structuralist Poetics

Since I don't have information about how we read title pages, let's begin with the title and ignore for the moment the subtitle. Anyone in literature knows that a poetics is a description of literature--according to types primarily--and that Aristotle wrote the poetics from which all others ensue. Structuralist, a term we sometimes apply to Aristotle, is also used to refer to contemporary French criticism, to a period in linguistics (Saussure, Sapir, Boaz), which emphasizes description over prescription and method over theory, and to a kind of anthropology associated with Claude Levi-Strauss, which is both descriptive and typological. The subtitle, Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature, constrains these early sweeping inferences by essentially suggesting possible modifications. This is not likely to be a poetics that simply throws out music and adds the nouvau roman; somehow it is going to tell us what to do with the common concerns of philosophy, linguistics, and literary theory. Compare this title page with the next:

Title page of Edward O. Wilson's On Human Nature

I find this one rich in 18th century references but otherwise lacking. I simply can't tell much just by looking at the title. The press, however, tells me that I ought not dismiss the work. As does the press in the first instance. Cornell University Press has a good reputation in literary criticism, not to mention editing and proofreading. Culler was an newcomer when the book was published, so his name was not by itself likely to recommend the work, but Oxford is itself a recommendation.

The way I have presented it to you today, and the way I mostly see it, conventional deixis recommends the writer to us, much as a host recommends another guest to us, or the chair of a session recommends a speaker. The second kind of deixis, inventional deixis, either satisfies our expectations or

disappoints us, much as guests and speakers do, either they live up to their introductions or they do not. Let me illustrate with one display of inventional deixis in Structuralist Poetics, the system of relating claim to evidence, which I suspect characterizes first books in the academic community and possibly the work of all but a few mavericks. Let me read you the major claim:

> In this sense structuralism effects an important reversal of perspective, granting precedence to the task of formulating a comprehensive theory of literary discourse and assigning a secondary place to the interpretation of individual texts (p. 118).

This claim, what the book is about, comes in the sixth chapter, more than a third of the way into the book.

What then was Culler doing in the first five chapters? Reviewing the literature. That's what academics do. They review the literature. But, he wasn't reviewing the literature the way most dissertation writers review it. The review of the literature is so loathesome to most dissertation writers that they dispense with it, like some loathesome food one is forced to eat as a child. Consequently, the review usually reads more like an affadavit than a review, a proof, or a promise, that the writer has read everything the committee asked, and then some.

What distinguishes Culler's review from the review presented in most dissertations is that Culler's review sets up the first half of an inventional deixis--by pointing the way to his major claim, so that when he finally says, in effect, "We don't need any more interpretations, we need a theory of interpretations," readers are inclined to see the claim as inevitable, even if they also see it as distasteful, shocking, abhorrent, and disruptive. By carefully pointing to the claim all along, Culler plays fair with the reader, since the claim has not only been substantiated but hinted at long before it was laid out in front of the reader. The order then is not claim to evidence, but evidence

to claim, which is in turn followed by evidence in later chapters--the claim is actually nestling among the evidence.

By way of illustration, I'd like to talk about what Culler sets up in Chapter Three, "Jakobson's Poetic Analyses." He uses Roman Jakobson as the leading exponent of structural linguistic criticism and towards the end of Chapter Three demonstrates how Jakobson's commitment to linguistics leads to an erroneous, at the very least, unsatisfactory interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnet, "The Expense of Spirit." Culler writes:

> His own analyses are vitiated by the belief that linguistics provides an automatic discovery procedure for poetic patterns and by his failure to perceive that the central task is to explain how poetic structures emerge from the multiplicity of potential linguistic structures (p. 74).

Consequently, Culler argues that Jakobson's linguistic interpretations get literature no closer to a theory of interpretation than those endless interpretations he accuses the New Critics of spawning. Jakobson just gives us one more.

When Culler claims in Chapter 6 that there is no theory of interpretation, just endless interpretations, the reader can see what Culler sees; the deixis is complete because the evidence has been pointing to, referring to such a claim all along. Like the woman who exclaims at the sight of leftovers, "This again," Culler might have expressed himself differently, but he is not likely to have expressed anything but that proposition. Inventional deixis, then, limits the possibilities, making fewer and fewer reader inferences possible, finally making the claim, when it actually comes, <u>appear reasonable</u>, to some readers <u>inevitable</u>.

Deixis is a human act, in both its conventional and inventional forms. It is a cultural act--a rhetorical act. I find its possibilities for rhetoric tantalizing, not just at the point of theory but at the point of application as

well. My students come to school having learned a deixis that surely contradicts the pattern I have just laid out--they move from claim to claim, innocent of evidence it would seem. Most student rhetorics prescribe a different pattern from the one I've described--thesis to evidence--and most of us emphasize thesis to the exclusion of evidence, calling only for examples and details. It may well be that thesis to evidence is productive in your classroom, but I have not found it so.

What I have found is that students come to school prepared to write about their opinions (which they call their ideas). It is an uncomfortable truth about teaching writing that their "ideas" simply are not interesting, if they do not also present us with an explanation of how they came by them or an interpretation of what they mean.

Deixis in published academic writing suggests that we ought to reconsider the evidence, ought to pay more attention than we have to the overwhelming importance of evidence in the academic community. This is not simply a matter of being more specific or of providing examples. Academic prose is literally a mirror of popular writing--right is left and left right. The model or paradigm I seek, then, which takes into account the fully enculturated prose of published academics, subordinates claims to evidence. Such a rhetoric neither reduces writing to deductive or inductive thinking, nor does it needlessly confuse the student's job--writing school prose--with other tasks performed by writers--telling stories, writing poems, or writing resumes--which are also important, but which are not the focus of school writing. This rhetoric attempts to describe how academic shamans use language in support of the community and its values because this rhetoric assumes that students ought to be more than tourists in academia.